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FOR NEA/FO (DONICK,GRAY) NEA/RA (FOX) NEA/MAG (LAWRENCE)  
NEA/PPD (WHITE, AGNEW) NEA/PA NEA/IPA I/GNEA CWG-PD

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: A/S Welch visit to Tunis  
March 14- 16, 2006

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Tunisian media provided wide and positive coverage of the March 14 -16 visit of Assistant Secretary Welch. Headlines in all papers focused on the

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strength and "excellence" of U.S.-Tunisian relations and referred to "discussions of international issues of mutual concern." Two of the more independent private newspapers reported accurately on A/S Welch's comments on the need for further political reform in Tunisia, as did the AP wire service. The government-owned newspapers capitalized on the visit in editorials praising Tunisian diplomacy and its "balanced foreign-policy." While broadcast media covered A/S Welch's meetings with GOT officials, including the President, Tunisian television and radio did not cover the press conference. End Summary.

¶2. (U) All of the March 15, 2006 Tunisian dailies led with photos and articles dedicated to the visit of A/S Welch. All papers published an article written by the official Tunisian news agency (TAP) on A/S Welch's meeting with President Ben Ali with headlines emphasizing the strength of Tunisian-American relations and a "common will to reinforce" these bilateral relations. Some of these papers also sub-headlined the fact that the meetings had included discussions of "international questions of mutual interest such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict." The TAP article also contained excerpts from A/S Welch's stand-up after the meeting, highlighting the fact that he had passed to President Ben Ali the warm greetings of American officials such as the President, the Vice-President, and Secretary Rice and that they had discussed the issues of Iran, instability in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Tunisian television and radio also reported on the meeting with President Ben Ali, highlighting the same issues as the print media.

¶3. (U) Two of the March 15 government-owned newspapers also carried a TAP article on A/S Welch's meeting with Minister of Development and Economic Cooperation Mohamed Nouri Jouini. The article highlighted A/S Welch's praise for the fact that Tunisia had accomplished political stability and significant socioeconomic progress that made it attractive to American investors. Three of the government-owned newspapers also carried editorials citing the visit of A/S Welch as further proof of Tunisia's diplomatic skills and "balanced foreign policy."

¶4. (SBU) While most papers covered the March 15 press conference, there was a clear divide in the nature of the reporting by the government-owned and government-controlled private press and that of the more independent private press and the international wire services. The government-owned newspapers again highlighted A/S Welch's praise for Tunisia and then focused on his explanation of the events in Jericho and the US position in Hamas. The government-controlled private Tunisian newspapers focused their reporting on the press conference almost exclusively on the situation in Jericho, Hamas, and "the difficult situation" in Iraq, with passing mention of American readiness "to support human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Tunisia." The more independent privately-owned papers, while also highlighting the Assistant Secretary's praise for Tunisia, accurately reported on A/S Welch's comments that those who do not go forward on the path of reform, go backwards as well as the call for political reform to include "the right to free and peaceful assembly, civil society, more channels of information and free internet access." The AP wire story on the press conference focused almost exclusively on A/S Welch's call for reinforcing human rights and democracy in Tunisia. There was no television coverage of the press conference.

¶5. (U) Sample headlines on the visit include:

"La Presse" (government-owned French language daily):  
"President Ben Ali receives the American Assistant Secretary for Middle East affairs. Tunisian-American

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relations excellent in all areas, declares Mr. David Welch." "Press Conference with Mr. David Welch, Assistant Secretary of State: 'Our partnership with Tunisia will remain strong.' 'President Bush gives great importance to the counsel and views of President Ben Ali.'" "Tunisia has much to be proud of in its great accomplishments.'" "Tunisia-US economic cooperation:

Tunisia, an attractive destination for American investments."

"Le Renouveau" (ruling party French language daily):  
"President Ben Ali receives the American Assistant Secretary for Middle East affairs. Tunisian-American

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relations excellent in all areas." "Tunisia-USA: Homage to the socio-economic progress realized by Tunisia."

"Ash Shourouq" (private Arabic language daily):  
"Bilateral relations and developments on the international scene were on the agenda of President Ben's meeting with A/S Welch", "Tunisia-American partnership is strong"

"Le Temps" (private French language daily): "The Chief of State receives A/S David Welch. Exemplary relations. Review of international issues of common concern." "For 50 years, the US has been a partner to Tunisia. And we still support it in the deepening of its reforms."

"As Sabah" (private Arabic language daily): "A/S Welch: 'Relations with Tunisia are excellent in all areas.'", "David Welch in a press conference: 'This is what happened in Jericho, and if we had the choice to stay, we would have done so.'""Tunisia has a lot to be proud of at various levels".

"Le Quotidien" (private French language daily): "Tunisia-USA: Common will to reinforce bilateral relations." "US Assistant Secretary for Middle East and North African affairs: The situation in Iraq is difficult."

AP wire story: "Washington exhorts Tunisia to engage more resolutely on the path to democracy." HUDSON